



Providing return-to-work assistance

June 2004

Helping injured workers return to work as soon as medically possible is one of five high-priority projects at the Department of Labor and Industries. Return to work speeds an injured worker's recovery, and reduces the financial impact of a workers' compensation claim – on the worker, the employer and the workers' compensation system. The key is to act quickly. Changes at L&I will encourage return-to-work options much earlier in the claims process, to everyone's benefit.

What is return to work?

Return to work simply means taking steps to help an injured worker get back to work quickly, safely and, if necessary, with assistance. Options include:

- Working shorter hours.
- Performing transitional work. For example, a worker might perform some of her original duties or different duties with lighter physical demands. Performing a different job temporarily is another option.
- Working in a modified job. "Job modification" means making adjustments to the work site; changing the job to meet the worker's limitations; or providing tools, equipment or appliances that allow the worker to work within his limitations.

Why is return to work so important?

Numerous occupational health studies identify a connection between the duration of a workers' compensation claim and long-term loss of earning power. The longer injured workers remain off work, the harder it is for them to return to their original job and wage. Partial wage-replacement (time-loss) benefits will never offset a full wage. Lengthy time-loss claims drive up workers' compensation rates for the employer and increase the cost of operating the workers' compensation system.

After two months off work, a worker who earns \$2,513 a month would lose \$994 while on time-loss benefits.

What is L&I doing to encourage return to work sooner?

L&I has a new effort under way to return injured workers to their jobs as soon as medically possible. Here's how it works: when an injured worker has received time-loss benefits for 14 days, his or her claim is assigned to an Early Return-to-Work (ERTW) team in one of L&I's local offices. The team works with the injured worker, employer and medical provider to explore return-to-work possibilities.

Who are the ERTW team members and what do they do?

Members of the Early Return-to-Work teams are experts in several fields. They are Vocational Services Consultants, Therapist Consultants and Nurse Consultants. These experts are trained professionals who know how to talk with doctors and help employers implement medically appropriate return-to-work options. Customer Service Specialists assist the consultants by making the initial phone call to the injured worker and employer.

Are other resources available to employers who offer return to work?

Yes. The ERTW teams have the flexibility to pull together the right mix of services for a specific worker and employer. Some of these services include:

- A Risk Management Specialist is available to explain the financial benefits of return to work. This specialist can show an employer how a workers' compensation claim affects the company's "experience factor" and premiums.
- A safety consultant can provide an on-site consultation for an employer who wants to prevent future worker injuries by improving workplace safety.
- Job modification funds from L&I may be available. These funds help an employer cover the costs of modifying a workstation to allow an injured worker to return to his or her original job.

What are some examples of successful return-to-work options?

Here are three examples of how L&I has helped injured workers and employers.

- **Office worker.** The worker injured her neck in a car accident that occurred during work-related travel. Limited neck motion and pain kept her from working full time. Job modification funds from L&I were used to buy a high-backed chair that supported her neck. The chair had a movable cushion she could lean her neck against, which allowed the neck muscles to relax. Two weeks after getting the chair, the worker was able to resume full-time work.
- **Diesel mechanic.** The worker severely injured his wrist when a tire he was repairing blew apart. In the first phase of his recovery, the worker could not do any work in the shop. Because the employer valued the worker's knowledge and didn't want to lose it, he created a temporary job where the worker provided technical advice to other mechanics from an office location near the shop. Later, the worker returned to the shop and was able to do some of the tasks of his regular job. The worker eventually resumed his full duties. He uses specially adapted tools to compensate for loss of strength and motion in the injured wrist.
- **Lumber mill worker.** The job involved handling varying sizes and weights of wood products during a sorting process at the mill. The worker experienced a musculoskeletal injury to her hand. Careful medical assessment determined that the injury would likely flare up again if the worker resumed the same duties she had previously performed. The employer created a permanently modified job, where the worker handled only the smaller products, allowing her to keep working and avoid re-injury.

*Labor and Industries already provides assistance with return to work.
Now L&I is encouraging these options earlier in the claims process.*

Where can I learn more about L&I's return-to-work services?

Contact the L&I office below that is closest to you. Ask to speak to the regional supervisor who heads the Early Return-to-Work team.

East Wenatchee	509-886-6571	patc235@LNI.wa.gov
Everett	425-290-1363	freu235@LNI.wa.gov
Seattle	206-515-2831	bour235@LNI.wa.gov
Spokane	509-324-2581	danc235@LNI.wa.gov
Tacoma	253-596-3874	hago235@LNI.wa.gov
Tumwater	360-902-4837	haur235@LNI.wa.gov

FIVE HIGH-PRIORITY PROJECTS

Providing return-to-work assistance is one of L&I's five high-priority projects. The others are combating fraud and abuse, increasing early employer contact, improving claims management, and preventing work-related injuries. The goal is to provide high-quality customer service and eliminate unnecessary delays that affect workers' wages and employers' insurance costs.